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The Cult of Mithras

Melvyn Bragg and his guests discuss the cult of Mithras, a mystery religion that existed in the Roman Empire from the 1st to the 4th centuries AD. Also known as the Mysteries of Mithras, its origins are uncertain. Academics have suggested a link with the ancient Vedic god Mitra and the Iranian Zoroastrian deity Mithra, but the extent and nature of the connection is a matter of controversy.

Followers of Mithras are thought to have taken part in various rituals, most notably communal meals and a complex seven-stage initiation system. Typical depictions of Mithras show him being born from a rock, enjoying food with the sun god Sol and stabbing a bull. Mithraic places of worship have been found throughout the Roman world, including an impressive example in London. However, Mithraism went into decline in the 4th century AD with the rise of Christianity and eventually completely disappeared. In recent decades, many aspects of the cult have provoked debate, especially as there are no written accounts by its members. As a result, archaeology has been of great importance in the study of Mithraism and has provided new insights into the religion and its adherents.

With:

Greg Woolf
Professor of Ancient History at the University of St Andrews

Almut Hintze
Zartoshty Professor of Zoroastrianism at SOAS, University of London

John North
Acting Director of the Institute of Classical Studies, University of London.

Producer: Victoria Brignell. < SHOW LESS

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Jaime Alvar, 'Romanising Oriental Gods: Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras' (Brill, 2008)

Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, 'Religions of Rome' vol 2 (Cambridge University Press, 1998)

Roger Beck, 'The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun' (Oxford University Press, 2007)

Roger Beck, 'Beck on Mithraism: Collected Works with New Essays' (Ashgate, 2004)
M. Boyce and F. Grenet, 'A History of Zoroastrianism' vol 3 (Brill, 1991)

Manfred Clauss, 'The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries' (Edinburgh University Press, 2000)

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Franz Cumont, 'The Mysteries of Mithra' (1st Eng.tr. 1903, Forgotten Books, 2012)

Richard Gordon, 'Image and Value in the Graeco-Roman World: Studies in Mithraism and Religious Art' (Variorum, 1996)

John Hinnells, 'Persian Mythology' (P. Bedrick Books, 1985)

J. Rupke (ed.), 'A Companion to Roman Religion' (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) which includes R. L. Gordon, 'Institutionalised Religious Options: Mithraism'

Robert Turcan, 'The Cults of the Roman Empire' (Wiley-Blackwell, 1997)



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